

# ECO-EXTREMIST



## REFLECTIONS

N° 5

**After a long period of time since our last number, we are back with the "Eco-extremist Reflections". In this number 5 we dedicate ourselves solely to put together the writings of Ramon Elani, a figure who's relation with eco-extremism is not one of close affinity at all and who has in recent times separated himself almost completely from the unfolding of the tendency, but in any case, has written some of the more profound and thoughtful pieces regarding subjects such us the anthropocentric arrogance of the human being, war and violence or about the infinite beauty of the incommensurable wild nature, which is why we decided not only to make a selection of some of his writings that we considered to be of interest to the eco-extremist reader, but we also took it upon ourselves to correct some mistakes in the translated versions to facilitate their reading.**



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# In the Milky, Dim Strangeness Lies the Way

*“Heaven and earth aren’t humane.”—Daodejing*

*“Faeries dance in the meadow and the leaf-crowned Nacken plays his fiddle in the silvery brook.”—Stagnelius*

Let us reject the classic anarchist motto “no gods, no masters,” and proudly declare that the Earth and its Spirits are our Gods and Masters. By what right does humanity claim its independence from the forces? What on earth does humanity have to show for itself to justify its defiance of the universe? Techno-industrial society is the promethean power that seeks to supplant the primordial divinity. To speak of freedom is the height of human vanity and to desire freedom truly shows how far from the path we have strayed. Standing upon the stormy cliff, you raise your voice to an ocean of deafness and indifference.

What is freedom but separation and exception? This does not apply to me, nor this. I follow nothing but the waves of my desires. Only I mistakenly believe that they are mine to claim even as my body is dashed to pieces upon the flinty shards of rock. Foolish, your desires are no more your own than the air you breathe. Your desires are constructed and sold to you and do nothing but manipulate, pollute, and reduce you. They drive you into the ground and enslave you even as you strut and crow like a rooster.

Better to long for the bonds of place and reverence that we all once possessed and were possessed by. Give us the rites that consecrated the gifts of the earth and tied us to its honor! Make us feel how small we truly are before the might of the cosmos! Show us that the path to strength lies, not in asserting our separation from the flowing of the myriad things, but in joining with the ten thousand flowers that bloom from the depths and then sink again into nothingness.

Let us make ourselves fools to be wise and twisted to be straight and cloudy to be seen. A furious, shouting thing that strives to assert its independence and pride proves nothing but its weakness and impotence. The greatest power comes from forsaking it entirely. In a world of sharply radiant diamonds, let us be clothed in rags and wandering forever among the dust, tracing the way with our forgotten footsteps.

Know that your glory is like a valley, not a proud peak. Be the softness through which the river passes on its way to the endless sea. Fall into forgetful sleep. The more we can forget, the more we can regain. We must shatter entirely in order to be whole.

# What Does the World Dream?

*“The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those that ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.”*

*In his twilight days, man dreams of his death. A lonely figure upon the cliff top gazing out over a black stormy sea under an iron sky. Beneath the stone, the volcanic consciousness pulses. The eyes beyond the flaming walls of the world blink open. The annihilating force of the myth of human superiority has never been more starkly visible. No poet understood this myth better than Robinson Jeffers. He stands side by side with us at the precipice of the void. Jeffers is truly the poet of our groaning, clamoring age. He utterly rejected the notion that human life is more important or valuable than the life of other creatures, or the existence of a pebble, a grain of sand, or a speck of dust. He saw human history as an inexorable march towards oblivion but he also perceived the consciousness of the universe, the spirit of all things, and thus, he saw that humanity as a child of the universe must be imbued with a spark of that consciousness as well, no matter how deeply it is buried beneath aeons of vanity.*

As a quick housekeeping note, I have chosen not to discuss Jeffers’ long, narrative poems in the essay that follows, although they contain perhaps his most articulate version of his philosophy and his most stylish verse. I have instead focused on presenting a wide range of Jeffers’ work from various points in his career, with the intention of giving the inexperienced reader of Jeffers a broader exposure of his ideas.

As the child of a Presbyterian minister and professor of Old Testament literature, Jeffers’ earliest influences were the Classics and the Bible. But while Christ was the “lord and captain” of his father’s life, as Jeffers wrote in the poem “To His Father,” he “followed other guides... through years nailed up like dripping panther hides for trophies on a savage temple wall.” Among these “other guides” were the works of Freud and Jung on the mysterious shadowy landscape of the unconscious, as well as James Frazer’s seminal work on magic, myth, and ritual. Beneath all of this lay the deeply held conviction that humanity was doomed and that history was destined to end in ruin, decadence, and decay. Jeffers himself acknowledges that much of his early poetry was simply “imitating Shelley and Milton,” though without their originality. Part of this archaic style was an attempt to separate himself from contemporaries such as Pound and Eliot, who were committed to innovation in poetic forms. As Jeffers writes in his introduction to the 1935 Modern Library reissue of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*, he could not become “a modern.” Jeffers rejection of modernism as a literary aesthetic or style, of course, reflects his deeper rejection of modernity as an experience of life and history. The world-shaping utopian projects of the Enlightenment and its inheritors likewise appeared to Jeffers as twisted, poisonous, and pernicious.

The promises of the revolutionary 18th and 19th centuries, promises and visions of a worldly paradise where suffering and struggle would vanish like mist before the blazing sun led inexorably to the horrors of the 20th century and beyond. The fantasy of progress, that history was moving towards the perfection of humanity and human society obliterated the last bonds that tied our species to the cosmos. Jeffers saw this more clearly than anyone. The world wars, the proliferation

of nuclear weapons, the domination of techno-industrial society were merely the culmination of a process begun long before.

Perhaps the greatest influence on Jeffers' work was the landscape and character of the central Californian coastline. Jeffers and his wife Una moved to Carmel, California in 1914. They had intended to settle in Europe but the war changed their plans. Along those rocky cliffs, Jeffers discovered a deep and powerful connection to place. He and Una lived in Carmel for the rest of their lives. While building a stone cottage for his wife and twin boys, Jeffers also found his love for masonry and stone work. This would become one of the major themes of his poetry.

The stone gives us the impression of permanence, the strength and ancient age of the natural world. Those who work with stone may feel that they have the power to manipulate primordial substances, the bones of the world. At the same time, to know the essence of stones, one must also know how limited our capacity is to truly impose ourselves on the world. Because as titanic as they are to us, the stones themselves will dissolve into nothingness over time. But humans seem to have this impulse to carve our faces into the sides of mountains so we can delude ourselves with fantasies of immortality. Humanity is caught as it were between these two poles, transience and the illusion of permanence. Robinson Jeffers' poetry reflects the tension between these poles, as well as the attendant conditions of hope and despair.

Jeffers consistently emphasizes both the absurdity and maliciousness of the human race and the unconquerable power of the world. Geological symbols are frequently invoked by Jeffers to dramatize the smallness of the human world and the vastness of nature. In "To the Stone-Cutters" he characterizes humanity as the "foredefeated / Challengers of oblivion." All the products of human labor constitute a challenge to the indifference of the universe, what appears to the limited human intellect as "oblivion." According to Jeffers, we build and dream and fight to prove ourselves, to prove that we have some significance and further, to prove that the universe has some kind of substance that we can understand, some structure, some meaning. Rather than the swirling storms of chaos and violence that we secretly fear. Truly, however, our best efforts are doomed before we begin. Jeffers continues, "the poet as well / builds his monument mockingly; / for man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the / brave sun / die blind and blacken to the heart." Humanity's challenge is ironic, somewhere deep within us. We know ultimately that our existence is contingent and temporary, as individuals and as a species, for we also know that the earth, the sun, and the universe itself has a finite lifespan. As we die, as our works are forgotten, so to will earth die, and the sun itself. Permanence is madly sought but cannot be found in this world. Why is such a simple truth so difficult for humanity to grasp? Despite the overwhelming knowledge that all things will pass into nothingness, why do we continue to create? Jeffers concludes his poem thus "stones have stood for a thousand years, and pained / thoughts found / the honey of peace in old poems." In other words, it is true that stones, earth, and sun will die but the life of a human being is so much more fragile and fleeting that we cannot help but be impressed by power of stones and old poems. While a thousand years may be insignificant in terms of cosmic time, it represents a near eternity to the mind of a human creature. Jeffers always seeks to understand the place of humanity in the cosmos and in this sense it is natural for us to long for whatever taste of immortality we may achieve, as delusion as it ultimately is. This is something that appears to make us what we are.

Rocks and stones populate Jeffers' poetry as reminders of our place in the universe but also as a source of power. As humanity was born from the world, there must be something of the world within us. In "Continent's End" we can see a vision of humanity that is small and weak but forged of the same materials as the cosmos. Staring at the sea during a storm, Jeffers reflects on the line that divides humanity from the world, "you have forgotten us, mother. / You were much younger when we crawled out of the / womb and lay in the sun's eye on the tideline. / It was long and long ago; we have grown proud since / then and you have grown bitter." 'Mother Earth' here is characterized as a absent parent, one who no longer has the energy or patience to care for an impulsive child. For Jeffers, humanity is not necessarily alienated from the natural world. The division has been the consequence of our history. And humanity alone is not to blame. The world, in Jeffers' eyes, is indifferent and cold. Our pride and hubris has not been met with kindness and understanding. Our mother is stern and punishes us with a world we can never hope to fully control, with forces that make us scatter frightened and humbled.

But once, before the rift occurred, humanity lived alongside its mother. And still "the tides are in our veins, we still mirror the stars, life / is your child, but there is in me / older and harder than life and more impartial, the eye / that watched before there was an ocean." As vast as the world is and as small as we are, the world is inside of us. The oceans and the stars. Its true that our mother, the earth, gave us life but we are not only the products of life. The oceans, the stars, and the stones do not have life but still were born. These things do not owe their existence to the world but to the womb of the universe itself. As Jeffers says, there is a part of us that comes from that source as well. The earth is our mother but we have a greater one too. When the earth itself was born the primordial universe was ancient beyond counting. That substance flows through us as well. Jeffers repeats this concept in the poem's final stanza: "mother, though my song's measure is like your surf / beat's ancient rhythm I never learned it of you. / before there was any water there were tides of fire, both / our tones flow from the older fountain." The older fountain is this celestial origin, that gave life to the earth itself and us. It is true that most of what we are comes from the earth but standing at the edge of the ocean and seeing the waves pound the granite shores, Jeffers reminds himself that there is something inside of humanity that is older and even more powerful than the earth, our mother. In this universe, there is always something older than we think. And we are all linked to the most ancient source.

Jeffers is preoccupied with time and history, which occurs on many different registers in his poetry. There is the history of the cosmos, the history of the earth, and the history of humanity. As Jeffers tries to broaden his perspective beyond the limits of a flawed and fragile human being, these three histories are juxtaposed, layered on top of each other. He understands that the events of human history are minuscule compared to the dramas and tragedies of the world beyond us. Nevertheless, while he tries to see reality from a non-human perspective, Jeffers knows that he will always be bound by his nature. We can see this conflict play out in "Tor House," a poem about the stone tower which he built for himself on the Carmel coast. Here Jeffers tries to cast his imagination forward into the future and asks himself what will remain of his home, his life, and even the ground on which he has build this life. "if you should look for this place after a handful of lifetimes: / perhaps of my planted forest a few / may stand yet." So after a couple hundred years, Jeffers imagines, some trees he planted may remain. "Look for foundations of sea-worn granite, my fingers / had the art to make stone love stone, you will find some remnant." Of Tor House itself there may even be some

evidence. The foundations of the house, made from elemental stones. Whatever remains will not persevere due to human ingenuity or industriousness, but because ultimately it was made from substances beyond the power of humanity. Jeffers' skill here is merely that of being able to coax the power of stones together.

But Jeffers looks further ahead. He wonders "if you should look in your idleness after ten thousand years." Surely, the trees he planted are long gone. As well as anything left of his home and the proud stones that lent their strength to his enterprise. What would be left of the place? How could it be identified? "You will know it by the wild sea / fragrance of the wind / though the ocean may have climbed or retired a little; / you will know it by the valley inland." Particular features may no longer exist but the geology of the place may still persist. The ocean will still smell like the ocean, regardless of where the shore now lies.

Finally, Jeffers wonders about himself. What of the self would remain after ten thousand years? "My ghost you needn't look for; it is probably / here, but a dark one, deep in the granite, not dancing on wind / with the mad wings and the day moon." Some trace of humanity may linger as well. But not one that may be perceived in the world above. Not an easily discern presence but a subterranean one, a geological one. The closest thing to immortality that humanity can hope for is to be written into the rocks beneath the earth.

From the beginning of his career as a mature poet, Jeffers consistently engaged with the natural world in a way that separates him apart. It is not merely Jeffers' portrayal of the beauty of nature that is important but what that beauty *means* for him. Jeffers' nature is not the anthropomorphized nature we are so accustomed to reading and thinking. It is not benign, it is not pure, it is not peaceful, it is utterly indifferent to humanity, and its power is beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, as Tim Hunt remarks in his introduction to the Stanford University Press *Selected Poems of Robinson Jeffers*, in Jeffers' poetry we find an image of nature that is "intentionally nonironic" and "redemptively beautiful" (6). The natural world can provide us with the only truth that exists. Human society is nothing more than a pack of lies. Our salvation, such as it is, depends on our ability to abandon ourselves to the power, flux, and beauty of nature.

In his preface to the 1924 edition of *Tamar and Other Poems* Jeffers writes that while we are inclined to think of poetry as a form of "refuge" from the world or a dream designed to soothe our pain and assuage our misery, we would do better to think of it as an "intensification" of the world that brings us closer to what actually *is*. Poetry is "not an ornament but essential, not a diversion but an incitement" (707). If nature is the only way to truth, poetry can illuminate the way for us. To do so "poetry must be rhythmic, and must deal with permanent things" (707). In this way poetry can draw the consciousness of the lost, weak, and neurotic modern back to what is real. What is real? What is permanent? As we look around we are confronted with a vast number of things that are real and just as many that are unreal, that exist merely as smoke or mist that rises from the icy water of a mountain pool. There one minute but gone the next. Jeffers defines the permanent as follows: "a railroad, for example, is not real as a mountain is; it is actual, in its fantastic way, for a century or two; but it is not real; in most of the human past and most of the human future it is not existent" (708). We are surrounded with ephemeral things and these are the things we largely engage with. Is it any surprise then that we think as beings of smoke, dissipating and flying apart with every breath. What is essential, permanent is forgotten by modern humanity: "here is what makes the life

of modern cities barren of poetry; it is not a lasting life; and it is lived among unrealities"(708). Jeffers' insistence upon the rhythmic properties of poetry reiterates this articulation of the essential and the permanent.

Poetic rhythm for Jeffers is not a matter of conventional understandings of cadence, meter, or verse. It is a geological phenomenon, the vibrating, resonating force of the living world in all its cyclicity and duration. The movement of the ocean tides, the march of the sun and moon, the endless recurrence of life and death. Rhythm is what makes poetry: "prose belongs rather to that indoor world where lamplight abolishes the returns of day and night, and we forget the seasons"(709). Poetry, for Jeffers, is what reminds us of our connection to flux and return; this is why "his work continues to speak to readers who sense that our technological environment places us in a false relationship to space, time, and the physical world."

In his 2001 essay, Tim Hunt draws our attention to "Salmon Fishing" as a prime example of Jeffers' conception of humanity and its relation to the world:

*The days shorten, the south blows wide for showers now,*

*The south wind shouts to the rivers,*

*The rivers open their mouths and the salt salmon*

*Race up into the freshet.*

*In Christmas month against the smoulder and menace*

*Of a long angry sundown,*

*Red ash of the dark solstice, you see the anglers,*

*Pitiful, cruel, primeval,*

*Like the priests of the people that built Stonehenge,*

*Dark silent forms, performing*

*Remote solemnities in the red shallows*

*Of the river's mouth at the year's turn,*

*Drawing landward their live bullion, the bloody mouths*

*And scales full of the sunset*

*Twitch on the rocks, no more to wander at will*

*The wild Pacific pasture nor wanton and spawning*

*Race up into fresh water.*

We may be inclined to think of the fishermen as alien figures that interrupt the beauty, serenity, and peace of the river. They are "pitiful, cruel," and as a matter of fact in earlier drafts of the poem Jeffers writes of the anglers "torturing" the fish. But the violence that they bring is itself a reflection of the world itself and thus humanity is a part of the world no matter how brutal and bloodstained. The sun itself here is menacing and "angry." As Tim Hunt writes "Jeffers projects a world where

salmon and anglers are both enmeshed in a sacrificial landscape of fire and blood.” The anglers, linked to the priests of Stonehenge, are part of ancient human heritage of violence and Jeffers is quick to emphasize that the sacrifice of a human life is no more weighty a thing than the sacrifice of a salmon. We are all bound up in the same rituals of blood.

Yet even in this vision of slaughter and cruel, macabre rites, Jeffers asserts the beauty and meaning of the world. In the end it is not the anglers that are the source of pain, it is the flux of the world, the “constant alternation of death and renewal.” Properly understood, humanity plays a role in this regard. Humanity is connected to the world through its blood-soaked rituals and massacres. Jeffers’ challenge to the reader, Hunt argues, “is to see and identify with the whole” and to avoid the temptation to merely observe “nature’s flux rather than identifying with it and recognizing one’s final and inevitable participation in it.” This is Jeffers’ visionary power; he understands humanity’s place in the cosmos and is willing to accept the frightening and awe-inspiring consequences.

Of the earth yet fatally unable to grasp the vastness of the forces that determine our lives. Humanity has within itself access to something immeasurable, the atoms of stars, the spirit of creation, the breath of god. And yet, and Jeffers is quick to remind us, we abandon this power in favor of illusions sprung from our disordered minds. So much of human existence is spent, for instance, in the pursuit of happiness, a theme Jeffers addresses in his 1924 poem “Joy”:

*Though joy is better than sorrow joy is not great;  
Peace is great, strength is great.  
Not for joy the stars burn, not for joy the vulture  
Spreads her gray sails on the air  
Over the mountain; not for joy the worn mountain  
Stands, while years like water  
Trench his long sides. “I am neither mountain nor bird  
Nor star; and I seek joy.”  
The weakness of your breed: yet at length quietness  
Will cover those wistful eyes.*

Jeffers’ vision of the world is not one without value, it posits a value that supersedes the value of the human world. There is greatness in strength and peace, though we must understand that the latter does not imply an absence of violence or bloodshed. There is strength in the mountain, there is peace in the grace of the bird that soars through the clouds above us. The frozen radiant heart of the star. The notion of joy, however, is alien to the world. It is a concept that exists only among humans in society. A concept of the most limited truth. As Jeffers writes, our desire for joy is a hereditary flaw and will find no foundation in the world beyond us. However, again, we always come back to our source and eventually we will be released from our mad search for things that do not exist by the very fact of our existence in the world that we shun. “Death,” as Jeffers writes elsewhere, “is no evil.” Who shall seek a thing called joy? Only the strange thing that we are. Neither and nor.

In autumn the leaves fall and the sky grows dark and cold. We are in the forest now, wandering and lost. Dry branches scrape against our soft skin and jagged thorns rip. A wind rises up and shakes the twisted trees, its whisper calms us in our terror. “No matter / What happens to men … the world’s well made though.” We shall dissolve into the universe. What does the world dream?

*Who does the earth think it is?*

Think, think, think. Nothing is more human and yet nothing more abhorrent to life. For Jeffers, as we have seen, the truth of humanity’s link to the cosmos lies in our capacity to perceive the rhythms and the beauty of the world. It is not a beauty that easily conforms to what humanity creates in the mind. What we see is only a beauty of fragments, which have been violently put asunder and scattered. We seek reason. But what could we possibly find that lies outside of the world, which is ourselves as well? We know that love obeys no master reason. Nor does beauty and the infinite world. In “Apology for Bad Dreams” Jeffers writes:

*I have seen the ways of God: I know of no reason*

*For fire and change and torture and the old returnings.*

*He being sufficient might be still. I think they admit no reason; they are  
the ways of my love.*

*Unmeasured power, incredible passion, enormous craft; no thought*

*Apparent but burns darkly*

*Smothered with its own smoke in the human brain-vault: no thought  
outside.*

The ways of the world shall always be impenetrable as long as we choke ourselves on the smoke of thoughts that have no mirror in the stream or the darkening woods. In the meadows, the rushing clouds, there is no thought. Desperately and full of anger we ask in the language of reason and therefore we receive nothing but dust and shadow. Fire. Why does the world burn? Change. Why must all be as it is? Torture. Why must we fear? And after all, there is only flux and return. There is love in things we perceive as horror when we look upon them with eyes misty with reason. But what force awaits us when we walk on the path of love? Power beyond imagining and passion that can shake the pillars of time.

In the end, the world is not for us, though a flower that blooms from the stars aches within our hearts. We need only to linger among the ruins to understand. Throughout Jeffers poetry we are reminded that humanity is a passing thing. One day we were here and another day we will be gone. The bones of the earth will not have noticed. Even now, when we are faced with the reality of all the horror that humanity has wrought upon the world, Jeffers stands to gently point to forest that reclaims abandoned farms and the saplings that push through the rubble.

In “Love-Children” Jeffers tells the story of a young couple in love, who made their life together in a small hut by the side of the ocean. They sought to live purely, alongside the fox and the squirrel. Crouching, naked, like wild things themselves. Their passions, their struggles, the flame they brought would all perish in time. And the paths they carved along the cliffs became overgrown and

time swallowed their every trace: “I’m never sorry to think that here’s a planet / Will go on like this glen, perfectly whole and content, after mankind is / scummed from the kettle.” Ultimately whether or not humanity returns to the way like these wild, loving, light eyed children does not matter, for in time we will be washed away from these shores and bathe in “the fountains of the boiling stars” and the world will remain until the sun itself withers into death.

**END PART I**



# The Way Of The Violent Stars



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*“The only way for humanity to make itself immune to violence is to allow the creation of a vast authoritarian system that protects individuals from personal violence through the endless impersonal violence of the state.”*

*“I hate the word peace, as I hate hell.” ~William Shakespeare*

*“I shall try to make plain the bloodiness of killing. Too often this has been slurred over by those who defend hawks. Flesheating man is in no way superior. It is so easy to love the dead. The word ‘predator’ is baggy with misuse. All birds eat living flesh at some time in their lives. Consider the cold-eyed thrush, that springy carnivore of lawns, worm stabber, basher to death of snails. We should not sentimentalise his song, and forget the killing that sustains it.” ~J.A. Baker*

As green anarchists and anarcho-primitivists, we have utterly idealized indigenous or so-called primitive people. In doing so we have failed to understand precisely the reason we should follow their path. Most discourse around primitive life is drawn from western anthropology, though from

the conclusions most anarcho-primitivists and green anarchists have drawn, it is clear that very few of them have actually bothered to read the texts they are referring to. Even given the Eurocentric bias of most anthropologists, those texts paint a much richer, more complex, and more conflicted view of primitive life than one finds in the vast majority of anti-civilization writing and discussion.

The most egregious assumption is that primitive life is supposed to be happy and easy. This is, of course, drawn from notions of primitive abundance and leisure. The fact, however, that individuals in primitive communities only worked for a very small amount of time per day does not mean that there were not other difficulties and hardships to be faced. Anarcho-primitivist and green anarchist writers suggest that modern humanity's neurosis and pathology is entirely a product of the alienating forces of techno-industrial society. Indigenous communities now and in the past had their own ways of understanding and addressing anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Of course, it is likely that they experienced these conditions differently than we do or to a lesser degree but clearly they still exist regardless. To avoid essentializing primitive or indigenous lifeways, we must understand that they experienced a range of emotional states as we do.

In other words, the old assessment that ancient hunter gatherers were happier than we are is irrelevant and likely untrue. It is important here to acknowledge the distinction between the terms anarcho-primitivism and green anarchy. While green anarchy presents a wide range of conceptual apparatus for confronting techno-industrial society, Anarcho-primitivism dogmatically insists on a prescriptive vision of non-civilized life. For anarcho-primitivists, the only communities that count are ones in which no power structures or symbolic culture exist at all. In this vision, since there is no oppression of any kind or rupture with the non-human world, there are no social or existential problems. It is, of course, unlikely that such a community has ever existed.

Primitive life certainly involved hardship and suffering. Contrary to much received wisdom, violence was universal among primitive communities and remains so in those that persist to this day. Primitive life was also not a leftist utopia of perfect egalitarianism. Of course, the fact that pain, suffering, trauma, and tragedy was always present does not mean that joy, happiness, and pleasure were not also always present. Perhaps it is so, as I believe, that the very presence of ubiquitous violence and struggle intensified the feelings of happiness, contentment, and satisfaction that ancient people experienced. But in the end, this is neither here nor there. The point is that primitive life is superior to our own because its impact on the biosphere was minimal and people lived in close contact with the non-human world; that is the only reason and that is sufficient.

People who do not know what it means to fight cannot understand violence. They fear it because they have never experienced it. Aside from posturing and play acting, most anarchists and activists have never experienced violence. This is not to say, of course, that many of them have not been brutalized by the police, etc. Fighting with an enemy is not the same thing as being ruthlessly beaten by an anonymous employee whom you cannot strike back against, or harassing racists and idiots in the streets.

The violence of the mob, of the masses, is a different beast entirely. It is more akin to being crushed by a blind stampede of herd animals than anything else. Traditional people understood the need for ritual combat, for battle enacted under the strictest and most sacred terms: to make a square within staves of hazel, to tie your strap to a spear plunged into the dirt.

Among the ancient people of Scandinavia the power of the state was weak and in the absence of a police or military to enforce the law, individuals resorted to ritual combat to resolve conflicts without disrupting the community as a whole. This practice, known as holmgang, involved the voluntary participation of both combatants and stipulated that the source of the conflict must end with the conclusion of the duel. In other words, the rules of holmgang were designed to ensure that other family members did not get caught up in the feud. Moreover, holmgang did not require one of the two combatants to die. In many cases the drawing of first blood was considered sufficient to determine a victor. Unsurprisingly, the practice of holmgang was outlawed in the early 11th century as Christian law stamped out pagan ways of life and hegemonic power grew in the region.

Even in such classic works of anthropology as Stanley Diamond's *In Search of the Primitive*, we find a picture of traditional life that fully embraces violence. Diamond writes, "the point is that the wars and rituals of primitive society (and the former usually had the style of the latter), are quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from the mechanized wars of civilization." This is to say, the type of violence, the experience of the violence, makes an enormous difference. As critics of civilization and techno-industrial society we have inadequately accounted for this. Violence and war are not to be feared or condemned. It is the nature of the violence that must be interrogated and reconsidered.

The custom of counting coup, practiced by the tribes of the American Plains, is an important historical example to cite here. To count coup means to demonstrate one's bravery and courage by achieving a number of increasingly difficult feats on the battlefield. As George Bird Grinnell observed among the Cheyenne and Crow, "the bravest act that could be performed was to count coup on—to touch or strike—a living unhurt man and to leave him alive." Joe Medicine Crow, the last war chief of the Crow Nation, achieved this feat a number of times as a soldier during World War II. Among his many achievements include disarming and fighting an enemy officer in hand-to-hand combat, as well as stealing 50 horses from a German battalion and riding off while singing Crow war songs. According to his obituary, Medicine Crow felt war to be "the finest sport in the world."

As ancient people understood well through their war cults and warrior societies, there is tremendous wisdom and meaning to be gained through violence. In the first case you learn that pain is just another sensation in the body, it does not need to be feared. In the second case, to stand proudly against another, an equal, is to test yourself in a way that we have little ability to replicate. It is a form of physical relationship with another that is unique. You learn that you are strong, that you are skilled. You also learn that there is strength in the other. That sometimes your strength and your skill are insufficient and you strive to make yourself stronger. You learn about the world, about the nature of life, grounded in the body. Modern humanity is utterly separated from this. To return to

Diamond: "war is a kind of play. No matter what the occasion for hostility, it is particularized, personalized, ritualized. Conversely, civilization represses hostility in the particular, fails to use or structure it, even denies it."

The violence that we experience, as modern, civilized humans, that we perceive around us in countless ways, brings nothing but trauma. It is utterly, radically distinct from the violence of the primitive societies. It is depersonalized, sterile, and more destructive on a previously unimaginable scale of magnitude. In techno-industrial society we experience the violence of the police, the violence of men against women, the desperate random violence of humans driven to madness and hopelessness, violence against minorities, violence against the poor, and most importantly, no matter where we are, all around us, every single hour of every day we experience unspeakable degrees of violence against the earth.

Moreover, the soldier is not the warrior. The warrior longs for meaning, for connection with the cosmos and himself. The soldier is an automated, anonymous employee. It searches for nothing. It kills because it has been programmed to kill. It has no joy, no sorrow, no thought of what it does. When such emotions do occur they are shoved deep into hidden places in the soul and when they break out they cause insanity and horror. The violence of the soldier is the violence of the machine. It is a bloodless kind of violence, a violence that erodes the soul, no matter what it does to the body. Those pitiful beings that serve as the instruments of the brutality of the machine understand nothing, they are numb and insensate. They are appendages of the thing that annihilates. They have never felt the challenge of facing a foe who is trained and prepared for them, to be joined in valor. They execute. They bomb. They murder. Existentially, they count for nothing. Their lives are nothing.

Peace is understood as little as battle. Peace is not synonymous with joy, nor with righteousness, nor with abundance. Peace has only ever been achieved through history's greatest atrocities. Peace has only ever meant power to the victor and misery and degradation to the vanquished. We, in the heart of technoinustrial society, are experiencing what peace means. A life devoid of joy. A sterile life. A non-life. And worse still, it is a life maintained perpetually by the slaughter of those on the fringes of our world. As the world-machine continues to expand outward, more and more will be pacified and brought within our life of shopping malls, endless highways, obesity, sickness, despair. And peace will reign. Peace, peace, peace.

*What do we long for? A life of joy and passion. A life that is alive, throbbing with blood. A world that pulses with vitality. Do we want the icy porcelain bodies of mechanized gods? Or do we want living animal bodies that break and heal and decay and die? The latter is the body that is shaped by violence, by suffering, by hardship. Just as it is shaped by joy, pleasure, and robust health. Ancient people did not live a life without pain. They suffered acutely and they experienced joy acutely. We experience neither truly. What would you choose? Who would not trade this world of atomic bombs, environmental annihilation, and mechanized dehumanization for a world of primal war?*

But let us be clear: the world we have is the world that exists. And wishing will not make it otherwise. Moreover, the skill, courage, and strength of the warrior will never defeat the impersonal mechanized destroyer.

In our greatest manifestations and noblest moments, we are beasts. The myth of human exceptionalism has poisoned us to the core. There is nothing wrong with being animals, in fact it is a far greater thing than the fantasies that humans tell themselves about their supposed superiority. Anything good that has come from human action or thought has come from our animals nature. The evil and vileness we do, contrary to received wisdom, comes the part of us that no other animal shares. To understand this means to understand that the world of beasts involves its own kind of brutality. When lions slaughter hyena babies, it is not because they are hungry. We dislike this because of our human moralizing. We easily perceive that “nature, red in tooth and claw” is not the whole story. But it is an inescapable part of the story.

The only way for humanity to make itself immune to violence is to allow the creation of a vast authoritarian system that protects individuals from personal violence through the endless impersonal violence of the state. If you can't protect yourself, you will rely on someone else to protect you, whether you realize it or not, regardless of the cost. Humanity is capable of radically limiting pain and suffering. We can live longer and longer. We can cure diseases. We can create enlightened societies with relatively low rates of violence. All of these things come at the cost of the earth, the things of the earth, and our connection to the earth. Posing a vision of humanity without hardship or suffering denies the reality of the wild world and it distracts us from what is truly important: not the avoidance of pain but our unity with the myriad things and spirits of the world. The strength and the future of the human race lies only in its ability to show proper reverence to the gods of the earth.

## Return of the Warrior



*“War ... is a means to achieve an individual goal: the warrior’s desire for glory, the warrior himself is his own goal. Will not to power but to glory.” — Clastres*

*“I am a spear that roars for blood”—Song of Amergin*

Rejecting entirely the ideologies of humanism and progressivism, I pose the figure of the savage warrior. The society of war, understood as opposed in every way to the anonymous mechanized war of the 20th and 21st centuries, ruptures the society of the State, the society of the techno-industrial world. The warrior stands at the crossroads of life and death, the human and the animal, memory and oblivion. Negotiating a constellation of cosmopraxis is his task. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro draws our attention to the differences between treatments of the dead among Andean and Lowlands tribes. In the case of the former, the Incan traditions of entombment and the funerary industrial complex venerate the ancestors, the founders of the state, the bureaucrats, the administrators. In the

latter, in the societies of war, the dead are treated as enemies, to be eradicated and forgotten via ritual ingestion. There is a war between the living and the dead. Those that worship the dead reinforce chains of bondage. Those that devour them wildly assert their own autarchy. The warrior renounces heredity, no honor can be gained through lineage. It is only his own acts of valor that may award him the glory he seeks. In what follows I will contextualize the figure of the warrior apropos its most elegant theorist, Pierre Clastres.

Clastres' voice speaks like an echo of things long forgotten. A tendency, a gesture that walks alongside us but hidden in the shadows of millenia. We *know* Clastres' words before we have ever heard them. The fire of the warrior flickers inside us all. De Castro: "One sometimes has the feeling that it is necessary to read him [Clastres] as if he were an obscure pre-Socratic thinker." Indeed we can truly perceive the essence of the world in the bloody ghosts he conjures. De Castro points us to Clastres' comparison between Guarani shamans and Heraclitus. All philosophies of dynamism and the world are woven together to form a banner against the monolith of the machine. If, despite its timeless chthonic resonance, reading Clastres fills us with the experience of strangeness, of destiny, of darkness and mystery, we can see that all we need to do is pull the blinders from our eyes.

Clastres invites us to hear once again the beat of the drum that echoes in our blood. When we dive into the familiar yet murky lagoons of the warrior soul, Clastres reminds us, there is only one question: how far are we seriously willing to go? He understood, as we must too, that the cosmic fate of our civilization is at stake.

**"Nothing is more outmoded than the man of war: he has long since been transformed into an entirely different character, the military man."**

It is tempting and common, De Castro remarks, to think of Clastres as a hedgehog, that he only has one idea but it is vast beyond measure. The primitive warrior stands against the state. Tribal war, in all of its brutality and cruelty, exists to prevent the annihilation of the universe. As we shall see, however, Clastres' writing detonates into a galaxy of poetry and philosophy, diffuse and sparkling against the dark sky. For ultimately, it is not the State, but the meaning of humanity itself that the warrior exposes and drags into the light. In the words of Claude Lefort: "Only man can reveal to man that he is man." Thus what Clastres shows us about the meaning of violence and war becomes of metaphysical concern, not merely and in fact in opposition to the realm of politics. The boundaries, the demarcations of territory are transgressed by the warrior. In its absence of this transgressive force, we are domesticated livestock. The warrior, who raids, abducts, and scorches, crosses all lines and resists all control beyond his own meaning. It is glory alone, and the prophets who direct him towards its achievement, that impel him. He comes, he goes. The laws he follows supercede the pettiness of the State. The monstrosity of techno-industrial society overcodes and overdetermines at every opportunity. Nothing threatens its hegemony like the deterritorialization of war. For this reason, the figure of the nomad, understood as proto-warrior, has been seized by thinkers such as Bruce Chatwin and Deleuze and Guattari. Clastres directs our gaze to the warrior, proudly sustaining a world of multiplicity with every thrust of the spear and each bloody scalp adorning the walls.

**"Throughout his work, Kleist celebrates the war machine...Goethe and Hegel are old men next to Kleist."**

In being-for-war, death is a biocosmic event that produces alterity. The warrior rushes toward death. It is not clear that the desire for glory entirely eclipses the desire for death. The dead continue to fight in spirit form, the shaman brandishing his axe is besieged by them at all times. The Yanomami shaman Kopenawa says that when the earth begins to rot “humans will become other, just as it happened in the beginning of time.” Vengeful spirits will hack the sky to pieces with their machetes, the forest behind the sky will fall upon us. So swift will be the end that we will not have time to scream. The spirits, untethered from the earth, will smash the sun, moon, and stars. And there shall be nothing but darkness.

It is the year 1970. Pierre Clastres lives among the Yanomami and declares them “the last free society in the world.” He remarks upon their incredible flatulence, a product of the high levels of banana in their diet. At night Clastres is left alone in the camp with the women for the men have gone off to raid. They attack their enemies at night and run back into the jungle to avoid the inevitably swift counterattack. The dead are burned upon a pyre, their bones ground to dust to be snorted. Days of leisure and laughter are punctuated by forays across the river. Canoes full of men covered with scars. Men gather in the dirt to duel over wives with clubs. Clastres travels with several canoes of armed warriors to trade for drugs. The hallucinogenic seeds needed grow only in the territory of a particular tribe. They hold a tight grip on their monopoly. In addition to tools and other useful items of trade, there is great demand for prestige items. These include women’s dresses, which are worn by the warriors, who have no concern for gendered attire. They blow the drug into each other’s nostrils through reed tubes. As Clastres’ party prepares to leave a young boy from the other tribe jumps into their canoe. He wants to go with them. His mother pulls him back and he beats her with a paddle. With the help of several other women, she succeeds in dislodging him from the canoe. He bites her.

### **“The sea as a smooth space is a specific problem of the war machine.”**

Boys in Yanomami society, Clastres observes, are “encouraged to demonstrate their violence and aggression. Children play games that are often brutal. Parents avoid consoling them. The result of this pedagogy is that it forms warriors.” The missionaries have failed utterly to dispel their love of violence. Guns given as gifts by the Salesians, with the stipulation that they be used for hunting and nothing else, are quickly integrated into the Yanomami war machine. “Try to convince warriors to renounce an easy victory,” Clastres writes, “These are not saints.” The presence of firearms of course makes it possible for larger scale massacres. Clastres points out, however, that it is common practice to invite a tribe to feast with the intention of slaughtering them all. Such acts are never forgotten and blood feuds are passed down through the generations. In a day with twenty-one hours of leisure time, there are ample opportunities to cultivate animosity for one’s enemies. As Clastres writes in his journal,

One late afternoon among the Karohiteri, a storm breaks out, preceded by violent whirlwinds which threaten to carry away the roofs. Immediately, all of the shamans position themselves along the tents, standing, attempting to push back the tornado. This wind, these gusts, are in fact evil spirits, surely sent by shamans from an enemy tribe.

At last the shaman captures the evil spirits in a basket and chops it to pieces with his axe. Clastres scorns peace. His dream and prayer for the Yanomami is “a thousand years of war! A thousand

years of celebration!” Harmony, he writes, is gained only through the digging of mines, drilling for oil, factories and shopping malls, police.

The thesis that Clastres is best known for is simple: the permanent state of war that one finds in most indigenous societies is a strategy, deliberately employed, to retain territorial segmentation and prevent the development of the State or monolithic culture. Tribal war resists globalization.

Clastres:

The war machine is the motor of the social machine: the primitive social being relies entirely on war, primitive society cannot survive without war. The more war there is, the less unification there is, and the best enemy of the State is war. Primitive society is society against the State in that it is society-for-war.

Thus the Incas, enshrined in their stone temples and sky citadels, looked upon the tribes of the forest with fear, hatred, and disgust. To the perfumed Inca aristocrats, the lawless, kingless inhabitants of the pampas and jungles were less than human. In this regard they set the standard which the Spaniards would later adopt in dealing with all Amerindians.

Techno-industrial society condemns violence even as it facilitates and makes possible degrees and kinds of violence unimaginable to even the most blood-thirsty and cruel of traditional societies. We are taught to fear and abhor violence. We are taught that there is no meaning in war. Even as this culture wages ruthless war against the cosmos itself. This incoherence resonates throughout society. When Clastres wrote of violence among the Yanomami, Tupi-Guarani, and Guayaki in the 60s and 70s, the culture among the anthropologists was no different. Violence was either dismissed from scholarship or it was deployed by racist ethnographers to denigrate primitive societies. Clastres did not fear the knife and saw in the spilling of blood a truth that has been repressed and forgotten. When the Europeans, hiding like hermit crabs in their steel armor, came to the shores of North and South America, Australia, Africa, Siberia, and the Islands of the Pacific, they were struck without exception by the love of war they found among the people. Nomads and farmers alike, primitive communities, were seen to be “passionately devoted to war.” To the Europeans, this love of war was repugnant to their doctrine of peace and the Indians had to be taught to abandon their violent ways through hundreds of years of torture, ethnocide, and genocide.

No matter where we look among primitive communities we will find violence blazing forth like a torch in the dark night. For all the cultural variations and nuance, this one thing appears to be universal. The myth of the peaceful primitive is pernicious. As we will see below, part of the reason this myth exists in the first place is the absence of an understanding of what war means outside the context of our own stunted and repressed conceptions of violence. Clastres writes: “one image continuously emerged from the infinite diversity of cultures: that of the warrior.” What is the meaning of this figure? How do we explain or understand the universal love of war? What does it mean for our society to have turned its back on this primal force, to abandon it to be the work of robots or sterile corporate employees? We have lost “the spectacle of our free warlike vitality.” And it has been replaced by a most murderous and vile peace.

Anthropologists have tried to understand primitive violence in a variety of ways and much of their thinking has trickled down to the layperson. They echo the poisoned gifts of ‘the enlightenment.’

The meaning of violence is consistently misconstrued. The figure of the warrior and his quest for glory dismissed and devalued. And because of this, the entirety of the primitive spirit misunderstood. In the first case it is argued that violence and war simply evolved as a survival mechanism via hunting. Andre Leroi-Gourhan being one of the foremost proponents of this theory. For Leroi-Gourhan, the warrior is simply an extension of the hunter. Mankind's need for food produced the hunter and the hunter, the man who possesses weapons and knows how to use them, produced the war and the warrior. Leroi-Gourhan writes

Throughout the course of time, aggression appears as a fundamental technique linked to acquisition, and in the primitive, its initial role is hunting where aggression and alimentary acquisition are merged.

In other words, if aggression is innate, which it appears to be, then it must serve an evolutionary function. Leroi-Gourhan imagines that the instinct for violence must be used productively and in that regard his mind is limited by needs as banal as food. Violence for him is nothing more than a predatory urge adjusted through the prism of social economy. Clastres cuts through Leroi-Gourhan like a hot knife through fat.

Our disagreement with Leroi-Gourhan is not that he treats humans as animals, on the contrary. The difference is that he attributes the wrong animal instinct to human violence. "Human society," Clastres writes, "stems not from zoology but from sociology." Clastres disarms Leroi-Gourhan with surprising ease and dexterity, which any hunter will have already noted. Aggression is entirely absent from the experience of the hunt. In fact, to hunt in an aggressive mindset practically ensures that you will go home hungry. As Clastres says "what principally motivates the primitive hunter is appetite, to the exclusion of all other sentiments." He also allows for the importance of ritual in the hunt. Of aggression, it is entirely absent. The motives for war and violence in primitive cultures, Clastres explains, lies far deeper. War is pure aggression, the desire to annihilate your enemy, the desire to bathe in blood, to raise grisly trophies to the heavens. No, a far greater need than hunger is at work here. Clastres: "even among cannibal tribes, the goal of war is never to kill the enemies in order to eat them." So much for Leroi-Gourhan and his "naturalist discourse" of war.

The second, and perhaps most persistent, theory of primitive violence is based in economics. This belief is widespread at all levels of society. People commit violence and go to war over resources and material wealth. This notion is inevitably accompanied by a contempt for the act of violence, it is an avenue, a strategy, of the poor, of those who have no other (better) recourse. As Clastres remarks, this idea is taken as being so obvious that it hardly requires justification. Violence arises from competition over a scarcity of resources. In our hearts we know this not to be true. What an unsatisfying, if persuasive, argument. The origins of this belief can be traced, Clastres directs us, to the 19th century, in which it was taken for granted that the primitive life was one of "poverty and misery." The primitive here is imagined as a destitute and wretched citizen of the techno-industrial world, who has been turned vicious and cruel by privation and scarcity. Since they are unable to provide for themselves, they must go to war for the scraps.

This notion of primitive scarcity is further bolstered by Marxist anthropology. Clastres, who was a member of the Communist Party until 1956, understands the pitfalls of progressivism. What is

Marxism if not the Marxist theory of history, Clastres writes. In order for this apparatus to function, the earlier stages of human history must be shown to be deficient:

So that history can get underway, so that the productive forces can take wing, these same productive forces must first exist at the start of this process in the most extreme weakness, in the most total underdevelopment: lacking this, there would not be the least reason for them to develop themselves and one would not be able to articulate social change.

Unfortunately, as is now well established, primitive cultures experienced very little scarcity and their productive capacity was vast. Here Clastres reiterates Marshall Sahlin, “primitive societies, whether it be a question of nomad hunters or sedentary farmers are ... veritable leisure societies.” In light of this fact the economic theory of primitive war collapses utterly. The idea of going to war with a neighboring tribe for food or some other resource is perfectly nonsensical. As Clastres points out primitive communities are profoundly self-sufficient and when trade is necessary it occurs peaceably among neighbors. It is also well observed that numerous primitive communities were faced with such dramatic abundance that they developed festivals solely devoted to the ritual destruction of resources. No one has ever gone to war because they were hungry.

The final anthropological theory of primitive war that Clastres identifies is embodied in the idea of exchange. Here we find Clastres pitted against his teacher Claude Levi-Strauss. For Levi-Strauss, primitive war is the shadow side of primitive commerce. Communities are obliged to participate in systems of exchange. When these systems are successful they experience productive and mutually beneficial commerce. When exchange collapses or goes sour war erupts. Levi-Strauss writes “commercial exchanges represent potential wars peacefully resolved, and wars are the outcome of unfortunate transactions.” This view of war presents it as a terrible accident, implicitly arguing that commerce is the superior form of social interaction. How quick we are to welcome the suffering of the spirit if it will save us from the suffering of the flesh! And yet how quick the body heals itself while the spirit clings to its wounds. Anything but war! Cries techno-industrial society and its spokesmen. But yet can we even say that commerce does not murder and torture the flesh? Are not the crimes committed in the names of commerce greater by far than those of war? Levi-Strauss and his colleagues could not ignore this fact: “commerce is often an alternative to war, and the manner in which it is conducted shows that it is a modification of war.” Yes, commerce has a body count that would put history’s greatest wars to shame.

In other words, Levi-Strauss sees exchange as the most elemental aspect of primitive group dynamics. Everything else is understood as merely a variation on a theme. Clastres will not accept this. It is war, he rages, that makes us what we are.

In the techno-industrial world we see commerce as a universal imperative. But commerce is only required when communities have become weakened and lost their ability to sustain themselves. We know that life within primitive communities was one of abundance and leisure. Given that, we must re-evaluate Levi-Strauss’ notions of war as simply an example of commerce gone wrong. The very essence of the primitive community lies in its autarchy, “we produce all that we need (food and tools), we are therefore in a position to do without others. In other words, the autarkic ideal is an anti-commercial ideal.” Of course this is not to suggest that commerce did not exist at all but

Clastres is absolutely right in challenging the analysis of his teacher. To suggest that the relationship within primitive life to war and commerce is accidental and primary, respectively, is to radically overstate the importance of commercial transactions in such communities. Levi-Strauss would have us believe that war is the accessory in relation to the principal, commerce. Thus, Clastres writes, Levi-Strauss completely overlooks the importance of war.

### **“Early Islam, a society reduced to the military enterprise.”**

So if war within the primitive context is not a substitute or mutation of commercial exchange, nor a struggle for the control of resources, nor an evolutionary trait developed by predators, what *is* it? And how can we understand its nearly universal presence? These are the questions that haunted Clastres shortly before he died at the age of 43, during a car accident in 1977. At the time of his death he was working on a new book that would specifically analyze the meaning of war in primitive society. Two essays from that unfinished volume remain. In these texts Clastres refined his idea that warfare and torture were deliberately implemented by primitive communities to prevent the emergence of the state or other hegemonic powers and thus to prevent radical inequality. The violence imposed almost constantly on all members of society reminded everyone of their place:

The law they come to know in pain is the law of primitive society, which says to everyone: *You are worth no more than anyone else; you are worth no less than anyone else*. The law, inscribed on bodies, expresses primitive society’s refusal to run the risk of division, the risk of a power separate from society itself, *a power that would escape its control*. Primitive law, cruelly taught, is a prohibition of inequality that each person will remember.

This is the monism of primitive life. Violence cultivates the assemblage of multiplicities, to borrow a phrase from Clastres’ followers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Furthermore, Clastres demonstrated, contra Hobbes, that warface only occurred between different groups, not within them. We return to where we began, war is about nothing but the pursuit of glory.

The key point to be made about war in the tribal context is that it itself is a goal, it is a response to a need. For Clastres, the primitive society is one that is both singular and plural, diffuse and concentrated, dispersed and congealed. It is no wonder that his work was so influential for Deleuze and Guattari and their theorization of the nature of schizophrenia and the rhizome. We can immediately perceive the shadowy presence of the *body without organs* in Clastres analysis of the primitive group. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The tribe is an ensemble made of tiny ruptures in the form of its members. Clans, military orders, ceremonial brotherhoods integrate the individual. What are we? We *are* here. We are the place. We are the things associated with this place. We are its stuff. The locality of the primitive community makes its sedentary or nomadic nature irrelevant. Whether settled farmers or roaming hunters. There is a place and a territorial right. To be abroad, away from home is an experience of terror. In this sense there is also a “movement of exclusion,” those beyond the forest, beyond the plain, the *other*. We might be tempted to think of war as a symptom of territorialization. But then wouldn’t the anthropologists find that wars occur in defense of tribal boundaries? It is not so. War is offensive. Territory is invaded, penetrated, rather than maintained.

How is it that the primitive world appears as a galaxy of stars? Self-contained groups and bands that each in its own difference light up the night.

Each community, in that it is undivided, can think of itself as a We. This We in turn thinks of itself as a totality in the equal relationship that it maintains with the equivalent We's that constitute other villages, tribes, bands, etc. The primitive community can posit itself as a totality because it institutes itself as a unity: it is a whole, because it is an undivided We.

How is this multiplicity maintained when within the community there exists such unity? Simple. There is nothing there for the economically or politically ambitious man. One who accumulates can do nothing but watch as his riches are devoured by his kin. He who aspires to power becomes chained to the throne, his throat ripped out and made to be nothing more than a mouthpiece for *the law*. This is his reward if he does his job well. If not he is butchered. The shape that looms up before us is a monolith. A vision of death, stasis, calcification. Without movement or energy. But the crystalline soul of the primitive world, cold, hard, and perfect, is shattered, burst open and given life in the flaming heart of war.

Finally we come to it. The twisting heart of the jungle and the chaco, lit by the uncanny ghost-fire of the moon. War is a way for the tribes “to probe the very being of their society.” What is the nature of the undivided world? It is to refuse to identify with others, outsiders at best. We are who we are because we are not you. And we will assert our identity in blood. We are all the same! Proclaims the industrial machine, the fiber optic nerve stem of civilization. We are all united in the slavishness of techno-industrial society. We are identical. We are living death. “Identification,” Clastres writes, “is a movement towards death.” The warfare and bloodshed of primitive society is a celebration, “an affirmation of life.” The monad is always threatened by decay and collapse. The crumbling force that lays waste to all our monuments. War is the power that resists dispersion.

We know that war is universal among primitive communities. Clastres cautions us against the extracting from this fact a confirmation of Hobbes’ “war of all against all.” Such, indeed, is the war of techno-industrial society. The globalized world is facilitated by a war machine that runs at such an accelerated pace that hegemonic power and dominion spreads unabated. Everyone and everything is an enemy and as such everything is victor or vanquished. Gradually all opposition is subdued. All autonomy is brought under control. Pax imperium. Peace reigns only after the earth itself is buried beneath a mountain of bones. Peace is death. The friendship of all is impossible because it annihilates the nature of identity. The enmity of all is impossible because it leads to the silent peace of the grave. Clastres: “primitive society...cannot consent to universal peace which alienates its freedom; it cannot abandon itself to general war which abolishes its equality.” This is precisely Levi-Strauss’ error in equating primitive war with exchange, you can’t be friends with everyone anymore than you can be enemies with everyone.

This is the complexity of primitive society: there are enemies and there are allies. The former necessitates the latter. And these categories are always in flux:

a community never launches into a war adventure without first protecting itself by means of diplomatic acts—parties, invitations—after which supposedly lasting alliances

are formed, but which must constantly be renewed, for betrayal is always possible, and often real.

Such alliances are created and maintained primarily through the exchange of women, which are also accumulated through via the spoils of war. This paradox, the exchange of women in securing alliances and the capture of women in war, illustrates, for Clastres the disdain toward exchange economy. Why should we trade for women when we can simply go get some for ourselves: “the risk [of war] is considerable (injury, death), but so are the benefits: they are total, the women are free.” Incidentally, here is a further refutation of Levi-Strauss’ proposition that primitive society is built around exchange. Clastres saw that exchange itself is only done in service of war, in other words, exchange only occurs as a way to a secure military allies.

War is a way of preserving the community. The cohesion, the permanence, and stability of primitive life are all achieved through an unending state of war. This does not mean, of course, that we are always doing wars, but we are always *at* war, we are always *about* war, we always *are* war. The permanence of war in primitive society creates the image and idea of totality upon which all else depends. My identity is preserved through war. I am different because of war. I exist at all through war. To maintain the uniqueness and separation of identities and communities is not a byproduct of war, it is the purpose of war. War produces “the multiplication of the multiple.” This is the force that resists the centripetal, the movement toward the center. The bloodshed of the warrior creates an elastic structure that allows for both dispersion and cohesion.

**“For ages on end agricultural implements and weapons of war have remained identical.”**

As we can see, what applies to a critique of the state also travels far beyond. When we talk about war and the warrior standing against the state, we understand that we are talking about something much deeper. Techno-industrial society itself depends utterly on the banishment of the warrior, who is subsumed into forms that are more amenable to this world and its logic. The bureaucrat. The accountant. The technician. As Clastres remarks, “the refusal of the State is the refusal of economy, of exterior Law, it is quite simply the refusal of submission.” There is no Law but our Law, the Law of the knife, the tooth. Insofar as war is directed outwards toward the enemy, the *other*, it is also an internal policy that preserves the integrity and stability of the community from within. War facilitates the preservation of autonomy in society and its indivisibility, its totality. We understand that the state is that which imposes division within society. The state is the apparatus of fragmentation and as long as primitive war remains, there is always a counter force to the power that threatens to blow apart the connections that keep us together. No amount of freedom can be suffered to erode.

**“What the nomads invented was the man-animal-weapon, man-horse-bow assemblage.”**

So who is the warrior? Who is this man that lives war? In the primitive context every man is no more or less than his capacity for violence. There is, of course, what Clastres terms “a hierarchy of prestige,” which is to say that some men are naturally more brave, their particular warlike skills may differ slightly. However, the status of the warrior and his place among his fellows does not confer upon him an increase in political power. There are no subdivisions within this group and command bears no honor; obedience and discipline have little truck here. Every man fights for one

particular thing and the orders of the war-chief are not of primary concern. Indeed, as Clastres found, chiefs who presume to dictate to his warriors are ignored at best and slaughtered at worst. No, the warrior fights for his own personal ends exclusively, he “obeys only the law of his desire or will.” In this regard there is considerable variety in the figure of the warrior as it presents itself in primitive communities.

While it is true that we can say that primitive man is by definition a warrior, it is no less true that not all men are equally called to their task. The core of the war-making men is made up of those who have become enflamed by their passion for blood and glory. These are men who have devoted themselves utterly to violence and the pursuit of honor. They exist for nothing else. Every man is a potential warrior but not every one fulfills this destiny. Clastres puts it thus: “all men go to war from time to time... some men go to war constantly.” Clearly when a village is attacked, it can be assumed that all men will act as warriors. But it is this special class that must engage in warlike activities even in times of peace. They do not go to war to respond to the needs of others but because they hear the drum beating at all times within their breast.

Moments of external threat and collective danger can transform any community into a community of war and this is naturally universal. What is more particular is the growth of the warrior societies. Nevertheless there are ample instances of communities that have institutionalized the practice of war. In these communities there is an utter dedication to war as the center for all political and ritual power. We know this to be true of the Huron, the Algonkin, the Iroquois, the Cheyenne, the Sioux, the Blackfoot, and the Apache. But for Clastres the prime examples are to be found in the tribes of the Grand Chaco, a harsh, dry, thorny wasteland that covers much of Paraguay, Argentina, and Bolivia. Among the *chaquenos* war is valorized above all else, a lesson learned the hard way by the Conquistadors.

So profoundly did the tribes of the Chaco worship war that the 18th century Jesuits had to simply give up their mission because they could do nothing to lessen their love for battle and bloodshed. In 1966 when Clastres traveled among the Abipone, the Guaicuru, and the Chulupi, the memory of ancient battles was still fresh and the idea of the warrior was still present in the minds of the people. Membership within the warrior societies is a form of nobility and the glory and prestige accumulated by a group of warriors is reflected onto the community as a whole. The role of society here is to enact ceremonies, perform dances and rituals that encourage and celebrate the achievements of its warriors in order to ensure that they will continue to seek prestige.

**“The socketed bronze battle-ax of the Hyksos and the iron sword of the Hittites have been compared to miniature atomic bombs.”**

Among these warriors it is the most aggressive who are valued the most and therefore they are mostly made up of young men. The Guaicuru established ritual ceremonies for entrance into warrior societies that were distinct from the initiation rites that all young men went through. And yet entrance into this select group also did not guarantee acceptance into the *niadagaguadi*, or brotherhood of warriors. The latter was ensured only by accomplishing particular feats of arms in battle and other warlike exploits. In other words, the choice to become a warrior means to pursue this goal with singular focus, determination, and most importantly, passion. The 18th century Jesuit

Sanchez Labrador wrote of the Guaicuru: “they are totally indifferent to everything, but take care of their horses, their labrets, and their weapons with great zeal.” Fostering this care for violence is the main task of primitive pedagogy and European observers have frequently remarked with horror upon the brutal nature of the violence that is often done to very small children, who are given to understand this as a prelude to the life of war that they will enter. Labrador and his fellow missionaries were thwarted at every step by the fact that the concept of loving thy neighbor held no meaning whatsoever for the *chaquenos* and Christianization in that context was impossible: “The young Abipone are an obstacle to the progress of religion. In their ardent desire for military glory and spoils, they are avidly cutting the heads of the Spanish and destroying their carts and their fields.” The warrior, as we have said above, insists on the need for war at all costs, whether or not peace has been established.

The experience of the Jesuits in the Chaco is echoed by their French counterparts in the Northern Hemisphere, as well. Champlain, in seeking to cement alliances and peace treaties between the Algonkin and Iroquois for trade purposes, is constantly being undermined in his attempts. He writes that his efforts were undone in one particular instance by “nine or ten scatterbrained young men who undertook to go to war, which they did without anyone being able to stop them, for the little obedience they give to their chiefs.” Here we see again that the chief is powerless before the warrior. War cannot be stopped, regardless of the political impetus to do so.

Even as they were engaged in exterminating a continent, the Europeans constantly attempted to interrupt local wars. The French did so by buying back as many Iroquois prisoners as they could from the Huron to spare them from torture and the tribes themselves from inevitable retaliation. A particular Huron chief responded thusly to one such offer for ransom:

I am a man of war and not a merchant, I have come to fight and not to bargain; my glory is not in bringing back presents, but in bringing back prisoners, and leaving, I can touch neither your hatchets nor your cauldrons; if you want our prisoners so much, take them, I still have enough courage to find others; if the enemy takes my life, it will be said in the country that since Ontario took our prisoners, we threw ourselves into death to get others.

This inability to dissuade warriors from violence is by no means exclusive to European interlopers. The same dynamic can be found within communities as well. Clastres recounts a story told to him by the Chulupi about a famous raid on a Bolivian camp in the 1930s that was undermined by a group of young warriors who decided instead that the enemy should be massacred to a man. Feeling that this bloodthirstiness would compromise the success of the mission, the young men were excluded from the endeavor by the veterans and chiefs. “We do not need you. There are enough of us,” responded the young warriors. Clastres reports that they were no more than twelve.

**“Genghis Khan and his followers were able to hold out for a long time by partially integrating themselves into the conquered empires, while at the same time maintaining a smooth space on the steppes to which the imperial centers were subordinated.”**

As we have established, war functions in primitive society as a way to preserve autonomy and prevent the accumulation of political power and the growth of the state. The role of the warrior is to

make war. And the warrior is the man who has passion for war. But what is the source of this passion? Simply put, the warrior's passion for war stems from his desperate, wild hunger for prestige, honor, and glory. This fact helps us understand the existential dimensions of the act of warring. The warrior can only realize himself if society confers meaning upon him. Prestige is the content of this meaning. The community awards prestige to the warrior in exchange for accomplishing specific exploits, which as we have seen in turn increases the prestige and honor of the community as a whole. The calculus of prestige is determined by society and it may be that certain war-acts are considered imprudent and thus no prestige is granted. It is perhaps needless to say that heredity or lineage bears no prestige. In other words, nobility cannot be inherited; glory can only be attained by the hand of the man who seeks it, it is nontransferable.

So by what particular acts can the warrior accumulate prestige? In the first case, Clastres identifies the importance of spoils. Since war in primitive society is generally not waged in order to increase territory, gaining spoils is primary. Spoils contain both material and symbolic significance. On the one hand there are spoils such as weapons or metals, which can be used to make more weapons. On the other hand, among the *chaquenos*, horses occupy a peculiar position in the hierarchy of spoils. Because of the vast number of horses in the Chaco, they bear virtually no use or exchange value despite constituting a large portion of war spoils. Indeed, Clastres reports that certain individuals among the Abipone and Guaicuru possessed dozens if not hundreds of horses. Possessing too many horses was also a considerable drain on the resources of the family or community. Instead the stealing of horses contributes to the accumulation of prestige via pure glory or sport. This is, of course, not to say that tribes would not guard their horses vigilantly or that horse stealing did not involve bloodshed and death.

Prisoners are the most valuable spoils among the *chaquenos*. Sanchez Labrador wrote of the Guaicuru, "their desire for prisoners... is inexpressible and frenzied." The experience of being a prisoner in primitive communities varies greatly from tribe to tribe. In certain cases prisoners do all the work, allowing men, women, and children to spend their time exclusively at leisure. In other communities the distinction between prisoner and non-prisoner is vague; prisoners live and fight alongside their captors. The high value of prisoners among the tribes of the Chaco can be attributed at least in part to low population growth. Labrador observed that many families had one child or just as often, none. Additionally in many communities women outnumbered men by 6 to 1. Naturally we can assume an extremely high incidence of mortality among young men but the extreme male to female ratios would have mitigated this fact via polygyny. Likewise we must also account for epidemics brought by the Conquistadors. The extremely hostility of the *chaqueunos* towards outsiders, however, dramatically lessened the impact of foreign microbes. Thus both cases seem to only partially explain the phenomenon. Clastres concludes that the women of the Chaco simply did not want to bear children.

This is the cosmically tragic element of the primitive society-for-war, the will to war brings with it the refusal to bear children: "young women agreed to be the wives of warriors, but not the mothers of their children." This is why capturing prisoners, especially children and foreign women, was considered so important. Children could easily be integrated into society through the Law of violence and foreign women were less likely to maintain the *chaquena* distaste for breeding.

Of course there are further socioeconomic dimensions of war beyond the accumulation of spoils for prestige. The Abipone and Guaicuru abandoned agriculture because it was incompatible with permanent war. Raids provide symbolic gains and, as we have seen, a necessary stimulant to population growth but it also becomes an efficient means of acquiring consumer goods. Why invest the labor power required for agriculture when you are raiding for glory anyway? This dynamic is illustrated in Guaicuru linguistics, which designates the term warrior as “those thanks to whom we eat.” The warrior is therefore the community’s provider. The Apache, for example, having likewise abandoned agriculture, only authorized warfare if it was determined that the action would yield sufficient spoils.

But there are additional pathways for the warrior to gain prestige beyond spoils. In fact, as Clastres and others have observed, a warrior who returned to the village without the scalp of a dead enemy gained no glory regardless of how much horses, women, and steel he brought back. The practice of scalping, being as universal in South and North America, explicitly indicates a young man’s admission into a warrior society. Clastres brings attention here to a remarkable but subtle distinction. A man who kills an enemy but refuses to scalp him cannot be warrior. For one who has been consecrated to battle, it is insufficient to kill, he is compelled to take his trophy. Here can think of the earlier distinction between men who are dedicated to the pursuit of war and those who simply respond to the needs of the community when circumstances demand it.

The scalp, as a trophy of war, is an object of immense significance. For one thing, Clastres writes, “there is a hierarchy of scalps. Spanish heads of hair, though not disdained, were not, by far, as esteemed as those of Indians.” One might assume that the scalp of the Spaniard, the Conquistador, the genocider, would be highly desirable but it is a testament to the autonomy and pride of the *chaquenos* that they did not even think enough of the Spaniards to count killing one as a meaningful accomplishment for a warrior. For the Chulupi, for example, the scalp of a Toba tribesman was the most valuable prize, due to generations of shared animosity between the two groups. After a warrior’s death his family burns all of his accumulated scalps upon his tomb; his soul will rise to warrior heaven upon a path formed by the smoke. To the Chulupi, there is nothing better than ascending upon a path made from the smoke of Toba scalp.

We have said that scalping an enemy is a requisite for entrance into warrior society but it is only the beginning of his path. The warrior, like Hegel’s slave, is always in a state of becoming. Just as he inherits nothing from the glorious acts of his fathers, with each scalp he takes, he must begin again. It does not matter how many scalps a warrior has hanging on the walls of his hut. Once he stops taking scalps, his glory is at an end. The quest and hunger for prestige is a compulsion. Clastres, who correctly places the warrior in an existential context, writes, “the warrior is in essence condemned to forging ahead.” He never has enough scalps. His bloodlust is never quenched. The warrior is thus paradoxically, a quintessentially modern figure. He is always dissatisfied and restless. He is a neurotic. He is formed and conditioned by the conflicted forces of a soul that yearns for glory but is dependent on a society to recognize and reward it: “for each exploit accomplished, the warrior and society utter the same judgement: the warrior says, That’s good, but I can do more, I can increase my glory. Society says, That’s good, but you should do more, obtain our recognition of a superior prestige.” This paradox is all the more acutely felt as the exploits and the glory they

confer are exclusively individual. The warrior does not embody a team mentality. It is every man for his own glory.

So just as it is insufficient for a warrior to have taken the step to scalp and foe and enter the ranks of those men who are living war, it is likewise insufficient for a warrior to continue repetitively venturing out, killing, an enemy, and returning with a scalp. This cycle can only confer so much prestige because at a certain point, a warrior can only risk so much by such exploits. For the pursuit of prestige, the warrior must distinguish himself from all other warriors as well. Thus he must continuously seek newer, riskier, bloodier exploits. Every act of war is a challenge to the warrior's fellows: can you do better? This can be done in a number of ways. A warrior or war party might decide to go deeper and deeper into an enemy's territory, thus cutting himself off from an easy avenue of escape. A warrior might go to war against an enemy that is especially known for courage, aggressiveness, or prowess. An especially brave warrior might go a-warring at night, which is typically considered imprudent due to the added threat of hostile spirits. Finally, a warrior might push his way to the front lines of the battle, deliberately putting his body in the way of the enemy's arrows or rifles. The act that universally confers the highest degree of prestige is that of a single warrior who separates himself from his tribesmen to attack the enemy at his strongest position, in his own camp: "alone against all." This is the only thing left for the warrior of great prestige.

Remarkably, this height of warlike vigor is shared among tribes throughout the Western Hemisphere. Champlain writes of an attempt to dissuade an Algonkin warrior from single-handedly attacking a Iroquois camp, "he responded that it would be impossible for him to live if he did not kill his enemies." Similarly the French Jesuits among the Huron observed with horror that

sometimes an enemy, totally naked and with only a hatchet in hand, will even have the courage to enter the huts of a town at night, by himself, then, having murdered some of those he finds sleeping there, to take flight for all defense against a hundred and two hundred people who will follow him one and two entire days.

The stories of valor Clastres was told among the Chulupi echo this kind of suicidal bravery; one famous warrior, having surpassed all other feats of glory had no choice but to mount his horse and drive ever deeper into enemy territory. Alone, attacking one camp after another, he survived in this manner for days before he was finally cut down. The cult of bravery is such that the Chulupi even venerate the memory of a warrior of the Toba, their eternal enemies. This man was known to infiltrate Chulupi camps night after night and scalp several men before disappearing without a trace. Eventually he was tracked down by a Chulupi war party and died under torture without ever crying out.

It is precisely this disdain for danger, pain, and death that corresponds to greater glory. As Clastres points out, the Spaniards were always confused that when they captured a Tupi-Guarani warrior he would never try to escape. Bravely facing torture and death bring glory, escape does not. As a matter of fact, an escaped prisoner is rejected by his community if he returns: "he is a prisoner, his destiny must thus be fulfilled." This destiny is invariably one of torture, death, followed by cannibalism. So the fate of the warrior is to continue to put himself in increasingly dangerous situations and eventually, no matter his past successes, he is fated to die alone, at the hands of his

enemies. He is a nomad wanderer, always traversing the line between life and death: “the warrior is, in his being, a being-for-death.” The death instinct may not trump the instinct for glory and prestige but we must observe that the one becomes the other. Thinking back to the phenomenon of the Guaicuru women refusing to have children, we can perceive that the death instinct may be a more influential factor than we might like to admit.

In one of the last essays Clastres wrote before his death he recounts a meeting with two old Chulupi men. Both were around sixty five years old. They had both seen countless battles, were covered in scars, and had each killed dozens of men. Nevertheless, as Clastres was surprised to discover, neither of the men had taken scalps and entered the Kaanokle, or warrior society. When Clastres asks them why they did not want to join this most prestigious group, they both responded that they simply did not want to die. This is profoundly illustrative of the death instinct dynamic that we have described above: “to insist on the glory attached to the title of warrior amounts to accepting the more or less long term price: death.” To be a warrior, as we have seen, means to never stop pursuing glory and to never stop facing greater and greater danger. For many men it is better to renounce the endless pursuit of prestige and simply be forgotten by the community than becoming imprisoned within his own passion for killing. This is the sorrow of the warrior, renounce prestige, fame, and glory or live every day drenched in blood, driving always closer and closer to death.

Ultimately, Clastres’ significance is in ensuring that we understand how fundamental violence is to primitive societies. And further that we understand that primitive violence is not an unfortunate blemish in an otherwise idyllic existence, to be swept under the rug and ignored in order to promote a prescriptive vision for the future. Clastres demonstrated that what is desirable, substantive, and eminently deserving of emulation in primitive society is precisely due to and constituted by ever-present, permanent violence. We must refuse to shy away from the importance of violence in the creation of community. We must acknowledge, in fact, that violence alone, properly understood, is the only means to achieve the kind of society we desire.



# The Way of Silence



“The dream is the small hidden door in the deepest and most intimate sanctum of the soul, which opens to that primeval cosmic night that was soul long before there was conscious ego and will be soul far beyond what a conscious ego could ever reach.”—Carl Jung

Stetind, the national mountain of Norway, was declared ‘the ugliest mountain in the world’ by an English mountaineer who failed to reach the summit. It rises precipitously from a gentle, wooded fjord. It is a dreadful obelisk of smooth rock that culminates in a blasphemously flat summit.

Writing in 1937 for the Norwegian Trekking Association, philosopher Peter Wessel Zappfe described it as the “horn of hell...the Eternal Masculine, a colossal sculpture of solemn, supreme, virile power!” Zappfe’s passion for mountain climbing did nothing to offset his conclusion that it was an ultimately “meaningless” act. This is not to say, however, that meaning does not lie dormant within the sleeping giant, lost in its dreams. But its meaning is forever obscured by the mists rising from the abyss of the human mind. The cosmic force of the mountain and its mysteries obliterates the soul. As he climbs, Zappfe murmurs to himself: “You, mystically terrible, you Sphinx above all fog! I hate you, because you have shattered me...Am I dreaming?” Zappfe’s dreams of Stetind are the dreams of eternity, of a defiant titan that stands invincible among the rush of time, of geological ages that come and go as quickly as the sun detonates the mist rising from the fjords into a heartbreakingly beautiful galaxy of flames.

Long ago the mountains Tai-hsing and Wangwu towered above the plains of Chi. An old fool who lived in a wretched shack beneath these twin giants starred in bitter hatred at the rock cliffs everyday from sunrise to nightfall because they blocked the path to his home and guests and visitors were forced to travel far out of their way to go around them. One day the old fool gathered his family to him and said: “These mountains have kept us cut off from the outside world for too long!

Let us dedicate our lives and effort to digging a path through the mountains. What say you?" The old fool's sons and grandsons agreed to his plan but his wife laughed in his face and said: "you truly are even more stupid than you seem. You are more than ninety years old. You do not have the strength to sweep away the shit from the stalls of the animals, how will you move these mountains?" The old fool smiled toothlessly and he and his sons and grandsons took up their axes and spades and went forth. Day after day the old fool and his sons and grandsons worked, smashing the rocks with their axes and filling their baskets with dirt. Many seasons were passed thus and still the old fool worked.

As time went on the River God observed their toil and began to laugh. "You really are a fool, as everyone says!" he said. "Old as you are, you have not the strength to move an inch of these mountains. In fact, even if you lived another hundred years, you would still be doomed to fail." The old fool replied, "It is you who are foolish. It is true that I will die soon. As will my sons and grandsons. And the mountains will not diminish. But as time goes on my line will continue and the mountain will not add to itself. And my grandsons in turn will have sons and grandsons. And bit by bit the mountain will come down." And the River God was silent as he considered the words of the old fool. Later he told God of this man's faith and persistence and God in turn sent his spirits to move the mountains to where they now stand in Yung, to the place of the Celestial Grotto of the Small Pristine Void.

Zapffe's 1933 essay "The Last Messiah" begins with a vision of primal horror: self-realization and with it, the radical experience of alienation from the cosmos. Man awakens by the watering hole to find himself a species alone, unable to find his reflection among the beasts of the earth nor a solidarity beyond the experience of struggle and suffering. The mind of man, that vicious blade which hungers for blood and ruin, presents itself as both his material salvation and his ruptured, lacerated fate. Without his tools and weapons, the "fruit of the marriage of spirit and hand," humanity would have blinked out of existence no sooner than it had opened its drowsy eyes. But while this poisoned gift gave him the capacity to feed his body, it severed him from the world and marked him indelibly as *other*, as an impotent destroyer of worlds. For the sword, Zapffe reminds us, always cuts both ways. The voices of the primordial spirits, the echoes of the fertile void, had ceased speaking to man because he lost the ability to hear them. He shrieks into the wind for recognition from the universe that spat him into existence and in turn, hears nothing but his own childlike sobs. How are we to understand the appearance of humanity upon the earth? Was it a miracle that created a thing that cannot understand its own power or an abominable cataclysm that brought forth a miserable cretin that is doomed to be a stranger to itself and the cosmos?

In the deep forest, as on dreadful mountain peaks shrouded in mist, we find a vibrant world of power, harmony, and resonance. Among the dark groves and whispering streams we wander, grasping wildly for the vision of wholeness that eternally haunts us. We long, with every drop of our envious blood, to melt back into the world that we can only know in our tear soaked dreams. We see death and pain in the creatures that run and hide from us in the thickets of the ghostly forest. But we know that their pain is not like ours. For them, the lessons of suffering and the meaning of transience and flux are unmistakably inscribed in their souls. The violence of the beastly world is pure and cannot be separated from their dreamy, dew like existence, which vanishes even as the dawn light sparkles upon it. Death is not feared because it means nothing. For us, we walk every

day under the sign of death. To look up and acknowledge it is to shatter a stained glass window. Our world crumbles into shards and fragments. As Zapffe puts it, suffering “in man [...] knocks holes into a fear of the world and a despair of life. Even as the child sets out on the river of life, the roars from the waterfall of death rise highly above the vale, ever closer, and tearing, tearing at its joy.” Are we not wrong to believe that darkness rises up and smothers the earth forever when our eyes finally close?

The unfortunate mutations that occurred in our species to produce this capacity for cosmic horror is mirrored, for Zapffe, in the case of a certain of prehistoric deer, whose majestic horns grew so radically broad and heavy that the creature was no longer able to lift its own head and collapsed into nothingness. Its glory became its annihilation. A crown of dust. A king of the abyss. We can perceive a trace of the promethean in this tragic fool. A doomed thirst to grow bigger and bigger. To become an undisputed emperor of boreal forests, enthroned among ferns and moss dripping with dew. There is a proud defiance here. An insistence, a vision of horns reaching up to the sky and piercing the very heavens. To have been born with the potential to reach unthinkable titanic power, knowing full well that the realization of this godlike force would lead, spectacularly, to its own destruction. Upon what road could this pitiful king walk? If, as Zapffe writes, he took measures to reduce his burden, progressively shattering more and more of his glory until his ill-suited frame was capable of bearing its weight, what then? He would have wandered the earth forever knowing that his existence was exclusively dependent upon denying his nature, his glorious destiny. What kind of lacerated being would he have been then? Zapffe: “What it gained in continuance, it would lose in significance, in grandness of life, in other words a continuance without hope, a march not *up to* affirmation, but forth across its ever recreated ruins, a self-destructive race against the sacred will of blood.” This is the black road, littered with graves, tombs, and ruins, that we walk as well.

Perhaps some sort of cosmic glory would be achieved if humanity unlocked the vastness of its consciousness, accepted that its destiny was in the grandeur and awe of cataclysm, of detonation. As it is, however, humanity has denied its fate and has ransomed its inheritance for the impoverished ability to simply be allowed to continue to crawl upon the face of the earth. Neither happy, nor glorious. A bitter exchange which delivers no reward. Thus it is not the tragic who are sick, but the hopeful.

From this whirling maelstrom of anguish and paradox, four dread specters arise. Their call echoes among the towering, decaying monuments to human futility that cover the earth like ancient pyramids in the desert. These phantoms swarm around us and haunt us with whispers. Are they angels or demons? It is only due to them that we are able to keep the titanic force of our consciousness at bay. Should we thank them for the moments of quiet that they enable, disingenuous though they may be? Or should we curse them for being the means through which we deny our true nature, though it spells doom? Zapffe like a dire prophet, from his towering heights above the rush of the waterfalls, points to them and calls them by name, thus:

Isolation. The stranger, who wanders apart because he is too sensitive to face the crowds and their endless noise. Fernando Pessoa, wandering like a creature made of smoke among the dusty alleyways of his ghostly city: “I’ve never done anything but dream. This, and this alone, has been the meaning of my life. My only real concern has been my inner life.” The world seeks to confront us with the enormity of our crisis. Upon the mountains, in the deep forest, even in the banality and

vulgarity of human society, it is reflected back to us every second of every day. To silence the ravaging hounds of our consciousness, to push back the awful weight of this tragic galaxy, we dive deep into an abyss of our own creation. The world and the world of men become anathema and we drift blissfully into a defensive sleep. We see nothing, we hear nothing but the echoes of ghosts we have conjured to sing and dance for us. If I cannot find peace in the world then I shall create worlds upon worlds within myself, and like god drawing up the lotus flower from the shadowy depths of the muddy void, I will find the meaning that is denied from me upon the surface.

I will sleep and dream and willingly lose myself in the ocean of my dreams, swept along by the currents of eternity, never to swim back to the world above, where I see the face of doom reflected in the sky. I shall become a martyred dreamer, one who stubbornly refuses to wake. I will commit myself entirely to the world of dreams.

Anchoring. The idea that towers, shining like a golden beacon, over the desert, strewn with wind-bleached bones. A monolith that jabs defiantly at god. A structure so perfect that it can bear the titanic weight of an indifference universe. In the monstrosity of its shape, the ruthlessness of its angles, human history finds something solid upon which to build itself. And yet, for all its bulk and solidity and the illusion of permanence which it engenders, it is a hollow thing and at its golden core, resplendent with gifts and treasures, it is nothing but a tomb. In moments of upheaval, riot and revolution, we see that this thing we have built as the foundation for our security is a lie. The hierophants scramble, they consult the birds, the cards, the relics of their hope and hastily construct a new bastion against despair. But just as the priestly caste will always erect new fulcrums around which the human world can pivot and turn, there are others who will never be content to accept them. The drive toward truth always threatens to tear the veil, even if those who do so unwittingly establish their own anchors in the muddy ocean floor.

The greatest anchors, the most perfect crystalline ideas, however, are the subtle ones, the banal ones, the ones that infuse themselves into the fabric of our day to day lives and thoughts. Whether we acknowledge them or not, they are operant. By rooting us to something firm and true, the anchor gives us the peace we crave yet by doing so it represses us and limits our freedom.

Distraction. The mind protects itself against the withering rush of despair my being in a state of constant, restless motion. If the mind can always orient itself toward the new, the unfamiliar, the transitive then it may be possible to allay the truth. As Zappfe acknowledges, this is a very common form of self-protection, though it may ultimately be the weakest. Zappfe: “It [distraction] can be likened to a flying machine – made of heavy material, but embodying a principle that keeps it airborne whenever applying. It must always be in motion, as air only carries it fleetingly. The pilot may grow drowsy and comfortable out of habit, but the crisis is acute as soon as the engine flunks.” The reality of the distracted condition is utterly untenable, just like the flying thing. It is supported by wind, without solidity. It is blown about capriciously by a thing that comes and goes. It cannot, in other words, support itself and the thing which supports it is unreliable, made of air.

The method of distraction compels us to wander endless, yearning for further distraction once the new and shiny thing has lost its luster and novelty. It is the method of the search. Carl Jung, from within his oyster shell: “People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls...Thus the soul has gradually turned into a Nazareth from which nothing good can come. Therefore let us fetch it from the four corners of the earth—the more far-fetched and bizarre

it is the better!” What strange roads will we not walk to escape from ourselves? We move forward to run away, never knowing that the thing we seek to escape is ourselves. Run from your shadow as long as you like. In the end you will fall in a desert of solitary footprints. We will walk forever until we confront madness.

Sublimation. The ultimate promethean form of self protection against the void of the cosmos. While the other modes each rely on a denying the truth of the world, suffocating and repressing what each man knows to be true in his heart, this final form allows reality in all of its bleakness. Its phantom purpose, however, is to transform the truth into a shape that is not so ghastly but in fact can even produce pleasure or the illusion of meaning. This is the mode of the creator, the artist. This rarest breed seizes on the obliterating force of the universe and tries to steer it in his own direction. We know that profound art is inspired by the tragedy of existence. In the hands of a shaper, this tragedy can be refashioned as beauty or even explode into laughter.

Zappfe's laughter giggles up out of the abyss.

But there is a radical distance required in this work. In the face of the tragedy, one cannot create. Looking fully into the murky depths of the ocean of the universe can truly elicit nothing but horror. For the artist to make his magic, to conjure out of this horror some beauty or meaning, there must be separation. It is only once he has turned away, once he has collected himself and put back together the broken pieces of himself, that he can produce something from this experience that does more than cause pain. How can I suffer, Zappfe asks, if I am writing?

And what of the “primitive nature” of man? Here Zappfe’s pessimism appears to weaken before triumphantly resolidifying itself. The world of techno-industrial society continues to advance humanity’s technical means as it steadily erodes its spiritual base. Progress brings technical advancement but by denying the spirit, it ultimately denigrates the biological and thus draws us further away from our position as doomed but glorious beings. If we could reassert the primitive soul within ourselves, could we find peace, if not salvation? Zappfe, it seems, is perhaps tempted by this idea. One gets the impression that he wishes it could be so but he is unwilling or unable to end there. Instead he qualifies the idea thus: “Though a deliberate degeneration to a more viable nadir may certainly save the species in the short run, it will by its nature be unable to find peace in such resignation, or indeed find any peace at all.” Perhaps something could be gained, Zappfe argues, by such a primitive return. But like primal man himself, it is doubtful (to Zappfe), that humanity would find relief for long before the voices of the abyss called it down again into the pit.

Though a return to the natural world and a repudiation of techno-industrial society may not solve the ultimate crisis of human existence, it is clear what will happen if we continue on our current path of accelerating technical progress and the concomitant increase in the repression of humanity’s spiritual nature. The safeguards against our cosmic despair will be augmented and become more powerful than ever. We will create unspeakable monsters to mutilate and dismember us. In the end, we will suffer more by the mechanisms of our own self protection than from any cosmic horror.

As Zappfe wanders off among the crags of the mountains, he leaves us with a solitary figure, the last of his kind. There shall be no true messiah, Zappfe writes, until the last, who comes bearing himself plain and open for the universe to do with him as it will, the one who “has dared strip his soul naked and submit it alive to the outmost thought of the lineage, the very idea of doom. A man

who has fathomed life and its cosmic ground, and whose pain is the Earth's collective pain." This last messiah devotes himself to the truth, for which humanity will murder him: "The life of the worlds is a roaring river, but Earth's is a pond and a backwater. The sign of doom is written on your brows – how long will ye kick against the pin-pricks? But there is one conquest and one crown, one redemption and one solution. Know yourselves –*be infertile and let the earth be silent after ye.*" With that, the last messiah is torn to shreds and disappears into quietude.

As Gisle Tangenes writes in his 2004 essay on Zappfe:

Some find his [Zappfe's] zeal as a mountaineer, humorist and early champion of environmental conservation rather at odds with his philosophical pessimism. According to another friend and eco-philosopher, Sigmund Setreng, this paradox is resolved by considering the 'light bliss founded on dark insight' of the *bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism – a wakened sage who accepts the futility of human accomplishment.

The link between Western philosophical pessimism and Eastern philosophy here is not coincidental, as we shall see. Much has been made of this connection, especially in regards to Schopenhauer's debt to vedanta and buddhism. In the case of Zappfe, we will interrogate this connection via daoist nihilism. We will especially examine the particular buddhist-influenced daoist nihilism of the ninth century Chinese author Wunengzi ("The Master of Nothingness").

The *Wu Nengzi* draws from a particular branch of daoism that evolved after the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE. The two popular daoist uprisings known as the Yellow Turban revolt and the Five Pecks of Rice rebellion dramatically weakened the centralized Han state. Though the two movements were quickly quelled, in the aftermath many of the local warlords saw an opportunity to increase their regional power and built up massive private armies. This move toward decentralization and feudalism effectively ended Han rule. During this period the warlord Cao Cao rose up through the ranks and eventually became King of the state of Wei. Many of the daoist intellectuals of the time were drawn into Cao Cao's service and began to develop theories to justify his sudden ascent to power. The ancient daoism of Laozi, which emphasized an underlying unity and wholeness to the universe was displaced and a new idea of *wu* ("nothingness") became central to daoist philosophy. If all things in the universe were borne from nothingness then that would explain the miraculous rise of a man of low birth like Cao Cao to the status of emperor. The concept of *ziran* ("natural spontaneity") was key to understanding the nature of nothingness. In the absence of existence, things could suddenly burst into being, without precedent or connection to the myriad things. Thus nothingness became the core of neo-daoist thought and much of the benevolent morality of Laozi became replaced by a passive and detached form of nihilism.

The salt merchant Huang Chao, who failed to gain position through imperial examination, instead used his wealth to buy the loyalty of the peasants and farmers, resentful of years Tang decadence and incompetence. With the strength of their arms he put the Tang emperors to fire and the sword. The empire had only recently healed from the wrath of An Lushan, named 'the Luminous One,' who returned from fighting nomads in the north to bring devastation and death to the silk-clad Mandarins. In this landscape of chaos, fire, and death, a man, a master of nothingness, fled and wandered the earth. He was weak, cold, and afraid. The man found a lowly hut in a village swept by dusty storms. As armies ravaged the countryside, the man lay in his bed and refused to get up. No one knows how long he lay in that bed. He inhabited a twilight world, shifting in and out of

consciousness, wrapped in his dreams. It did not matter to him whether the sun was shining or not. His world was all shadows and murky silence. From time to time he would shift in his half-sleep. He would take a pen and a crumpled piece of paper and hastily scribble some words. Then he would hide the paper in his robe, turn over and go back to sleep. As the years went on, he wrote more and more. In time, after his bed became choked with paper, he stuffed them all into a sack and threw it in the corner of his room. It was buried in dust. These papers were for no one and he would not share them with anybody. It was only after the man passed away into true nothingness that his words were read by others.

All things arose from the chaotic mass. From thence came the divisions and categories. Things became separate and distinct only from within the pulse of chaos and the abyss of meaning. It is the imposition of order and hierarchy that leads to what is unnatural. That man should be born as distinct from the scaly creatures, or the furry creatures, or the creatures with shells does not mean that he should not be counted among the animals. It will be asked, does not humanity possess something that is unique? Do we not have wisdom and language to place us above the other beasts? The voice of the master of nothingness rings out. For all our wisdom, we cannot know the brilliant of the creatures of the earth. We can hear them chirp and screech in their own tongues. Truly, the master says, all things have their own wisdom. And in that shared wisdom, humanity lived side by side with the beasts. For they did not know themselves to be different. This is the time of the primitive soul. It is the day before Zappfe's hunter awakens by the watering hole, a day that stretched for millions of years. In this time, the soul still slumbers in an undifferentiated dream of wholeness that never ends. But, as we know, the dream must end and humanity is thrust into a world of shattered fragments.

Wunengzi echoes Zappfe's words. Something changes. Imperceptible at first, perhaps. Then thundering through the cosmos like a quake in the fabric of existence. Zappfe writes: "Is it possible for 'primitive natures' to renounce these cramps and cavorts and live in harmony with themselves in the serene bliss of labour and love? Insofar as they may be considered human at all, I think the answer must be no." And Wunengzi responds in kind: "They could not revive the past. This was the fault of those who called themselves sages." For Wunengzi, the moment of our laceration occurs when some among these hairless animals awaken to something called 'wisdom' and 'intelligence.' For Zappfe, this is the moment of consciousness. In either case, it is the demon of distinction and differentiation that dooms humanity. Suddenly, the fact that some have scales and some have fur is taken to mean something of the greatest importance. Blood and raw flesh is replaced by the one hundred grains. The souls of the people detonated into 'animal,' 'man,' 'woman,' 'husband,' 'ruler.' And above them all stood 'the wise' and 'the sages.' Without this trick of the mind, there would be no axes and no blades. The sages, in their quest to combat the yawned void that had emerged, sought to solve a problem with even greater problems. They introduced the ideas of benevolence and virtue. Little did they understand the monster they had conjured. When there is law, crime leaps into being. When there is purity, contagion infects and spreads. When there is honor, disgrace blackens and taints. When there is benevolence, hopelessness and alienation swallow the world. Humanity was never meant to be anything more than animal. And now we cannot return and it is the fault of the sages. They have cut us off from the ocean of dreams, where we drift forever, sustained by and fully incorporated in the undifferentiated body of the universe. Just as, for Zappfe,

our fatally overdeveloped consciousness both facilitated our growth as social and cultural beings and doomed us to the cosmos.

That consciousness is the enemy of reality is asserted as boldly by Wunengzi as Zappfe. All originates from the void and the ether which swirls within that cosmic gap flows through all things. The myriad creatures, as Wunengzi writes, are only able to exist because they lack consciousness. When the birds fly and the fish swim, they do not do so consciously but rather as though compelled by the spirit. The birds have no awareness, no consciousness of their ability to fly. And if they did and sought to decide to fly as a function of conscious thought, they would surely plummet to their deaths. Does this not mirror Zappfe's prophecy of doom? Because we cannot but be aware of our conscious minds facilitating all that we do, we can only helplessly watch as we stumble and fall again and again. But Wunengzi is not a pessimist like Zappfe. The void, the center from which all things emerge, can be found if it is sought: "the great, empty void, this is the natural state of mind." But Wunengzi is also not like Laozi, who sought to teach the power of the way. Wunengzi knows that there is a fundamental rupture between our mind and our nature, and knows further that the mind will build obstacles and bring ruin to any attempt of nature to take control of us. Whatever we seek, Wunengzi reminds us as a whisper from the abyss, will be difficult.

We may seek to cultivate the void, however. Those who have done so experience no joy or sadness. They acknowledge their emotions as nothing more than stimulation from external sources. The body is understood to be the root of all decay, its changes are nothing more than the manifestation of impermanence. Wunengzi writes "If you are able to maintain yourself in the cultivation of the void then you won't know the meaning of starvation, cold, wealth, and ennoblement. If your emotions are moved and they take form in your body, then night and day, sleeping and awake, will be all a dream." Perhaps our capacity to return to a world of endless dreams is the only hope that remains.

Wunengzi reiterates Zappfe's position that our attempts to improve our lot are precisely what cause our suffering. Coffin makers and doctors, Wunengzi writes, do what they do to help the dead and the sick. But in doing so they hope and require people to be sick and die. They may not take joy in these things but they are necessary byproducts. Perhaps then to truly act in the interest of the sick and the dead is to leave them be and seek not to aid them. It is not the sick who are unwell but the healthy.

Finally, Zappfe's advice to be infertile and leave the earth quiet after us resonates with Wunengzi's conclusions, such as they are. The principle of inaction, central to all daoistic philosophy included that of Wunengzi, cannot be passed on to others. It cannot be inherited or transferred. The best we can do, Wunengzi writes, is to do nothing and leave nothing. Whatever we may find in the course of our own fumbling lives, enlightenment or the void, there are hardly any, or perhaps none at all, that are able to resist spreading what they found to others. When we die, there is no meaning that we can pass on. Successive generations will continue to madly stumble forward.

We wander endlessly through the desert of the world, a wretched and bedraggled army of beggars, searching for oases that are few and far between. These are Zappfe's ghosts of contentment and peace. Mirages of meaning that dissolve into mere tricks of light when we approach them. The dry, desolate world we hopelessly traverse is hostile and unforgiving enough and yet the clutter and detritus of aeons of human delusion make it doubly so. At every step the rusted remains of archaic

ideologies and philosophies cut our feet with jagged blades. In the wake of the horde is a river of blood that pours from these unceasing wounds. Unlike the proud, hoary Fisher King, who nurses his immortal agony in peace and solitude upon the Wasteland's throne. Roots and vines pierce his moldy flesh. Withered limbs wrapped around the seeping bloody eye of his wound. His beard droops down to the dirt where itmingles with countless millennia of accumulated dust. With every labored sigh, innumerable crawling things are disturbed from their nests upon his eternally decaying bulk. His foggy eyes do not see the ruin that has expanded outward into the world from his old injury. The world will fall away around him and he will sit upon his musty throne even as it slowly drifts through the gulf of space and into the void of time.

He will sit and quietly rot while the mass of humanity scrambles and struggles. Massive forgotten structures emerge from the swirling sand. Heaps of neglected scaffolding. Machines and instruments, the use of which have been lost to memory. Relics. Tombstones all. We know that beneath the surface hulking juggernauts slumber. We pray that such memories will remain shrouded in smoke.

At the end of his fragmented and forgotten text Wunengzi proclaims “return to the source and don’t give rise to anything!” We can also see this message repeated in the example of Zhang Liang, the marquis of Liu, who became enlightened, learned to govern his breath, stopped eating, and became a recluse. But we can no more leave our consciousness behind than the extinct elk can leave behind his cursed antlers. To return to a life of pure instinct and intuition, to find the essence of the void within ourselves will remain a dream. And in that dream we will find our only hope. Let us then endeavor to slumber this life away, lost in our dreams.





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